

I shall begin by quoting the first line of the poem « The Waste Land » by T.S Eliott for it perfectly encapsulate the tone of what I am about to present:

/ April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain. /

Indeed, as you all well know, the period that i shall be introducing happens right after the First World War. The costs of which had changed the mindset of many. Before the war, European culture embraced Enlightenment ideas of rationality and progress. After the war, writers and artists turned to new forms of expression that questioned a world that had allowed such a conflict.

The term “Lost Generation” refers to the generation of people who reached adulthood during or immediately following World War I. In using the term “lost,” many things are depicted:

psychologists would refer to the “disoriented, wandering, directionless” feelings that haunted many survivors. Yet, in a deeper sense, the lost generation was “lost” because it found the conservative moral and social values of their parents to be irrelevant in a post-war world.

They were considered to be “lost” due to their tendency to act aimlessly, even recklessly, often focusing on the accumulation of personal wealth.

The term is believed to have come from an actual verbal exchange witnessed by novelist Gertrude Stein during which a French garage owner told his young employee, *“All of you, young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation... You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death.”*

Stein repeated the phrase to her colleague and pupil Ernest Hemingway, who popularized the term when he used it as an epigraph to his novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

Thus, this term refers to this group of American authors including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot, John Dos Passos or even Ezra Pound, whose works often detailed the internal struggles of this generation. Paris was the perfect romantic setting for the Lost Generation. It was a city of possibility where these young expatriates could indulge in their creativity and explore their newfound freedom from the conventions of the past. They would go to jazz clubs, cafes and bar, and fill them with intellectual and artistic conversation. One of their many haven was the Shakespeare and Company.

In all of their art, some common themes can be perceived:

Members of the Lost Generation viewed the idea of the “American Dream” as a grand deception. This literature portrays the 1920s as an era of decayed social and moral values, evidenced in its overarching cynicism, greed, and empty pursuit of pleasure. Indeed, When World War I ended in 1918, the generation of young Americans who had fought the war became intensely disillusioned, the carnage that they had just faced made the social morality of 20<sup>th</sup> America seem like stuffy, empty hypocrisy. The rise of the stock market in the aftermath of the war led to a sudden increase in the national wealth and a newfound materialism, as people began to spend and consume at levels never seen before.

The reckless joy and excess that led to parties and wild jazz music—epitomized in *The Great Gatsby* by the grand parties that Gatsby throws every Saturday

night—resulted in the corruption of the American dream, as the unrestrained desire for money and pleasure surpassed more noble goals such as discovery, individualism, and the pursuit of happiness.

Gender norms were also completely shaken. Many young men had eagerly entered World War I still believing combat to be more of a chivalrous, even glamorous pastime than an inhumane struggle for survival. However, the reality they experienced shattered their traditional images of masculinity and their perceptions around differing roles of men and women in society. Left impotent by his war wounds, Jake, the narrator and central character in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, describes how his sexually aggressive and promiscuous female lover Brett acts as the man, trying to be "one of the boys" in an effort to control the lives of her sexual partners.

The role of women also changed. In the first chapter of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby's trophy girlfriend delivers a vision of her newborn daughter's future "I hope she'll be a fool—that's the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool." Daisy's words express Fitzgerald's opinion of his generation as spawning a society that largely devalued intelligence in women. While the older generation valued women who were docile and subservient, the Lost Generation held mindless pleasure-seeking as the key to a woman's "success."

While she seemed to bemoan her generation's view of gender roles, Daisy conformed to them, acting as a "fun girl" to avoid the tensions of her true love for the ruthless Gatsby.

Similarly, Gertrude Stein subverted the idea of femininity: far from the domesticity, Gertrude Stein wanted to gain the ability to achieve a career and personal successes where the support of a husband or father is not necessary. She did not marry, lived her life with Alice B. Toklas and held her own intellectual salon in Paris.

"All Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken..." Said F. Scott Fitzgerald. Now that all moral ground had been banished, future was more than uncertain. And just as Dostoevsky predicted in his novel *The Brother Karamazov* in the 19th century « Without God everything is allowed ». Rather than face the horrors of warfare, or the uncertainty of the future, many worked to create an idealized but unattainable image of the past, a glossy image with no bearing in reality. The best example is in Gatsby's idealization of Daisy, his inability to see her as she truly is, and the closing lines to the novel after all is death and disappointment: "Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgiastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning—So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past." The "green light" in the passage is Fitzgerald's metaphor for the perfect futures we continue to believe in even while watching it get ever farther away from us.

In other words, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary, the Lost Generation continued to believe that "one fine day," our dreams will come true.